

Getting an Instructional Design Position: Lessons From a Personal History

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The purpose of this paper is to describe some lessons I learned when I was looking for an instructional design position in academia. By describing these lessons I hope to give you information that may help you in your search for a job. To put it in terms that should please those of you who are true zealots:

Given a copy of this article, the reader will:

- (a) choose to apply the lessons described herein, and
- (b) obtain a desirable instructional design position.

Before I begin to describe the lessons I learned, I would like to describe briefly some of the conditions under which I learned them. First, I learned the lessons back in 1975. As many people are fond of saying, "times were different then" (but not all that different). Second, I learned the lessons when I was a doctoral student about to graduate from the instructional design program at Arizona State University. Third, at the time I learned these lessons, I was looking for a job in higher education in the United States.

The conditions I just described are likely to be different from the conditions you face during your search for a job. However, I believe that most of the lessons I learned will be applicable to your search for an instructional design position, regardless of the circumstances facing you.

Now that I have masterfully handled any concerns you may have had about the external validity of my findings, let me take you back to those thrilling days

of yesteryear (1975, to be exact) . . . the lowly graduate student (me) plods along again!

In the 1970s many people were talking about "the light at the end of the tunnel," and in January, 1975, I finally began to see it; I realized that within a few months I would most likely graduate from Arizona State University's doctoral program in instructional design. At that point, I decided I should start looking for a position I could move into upon my graduation. Thus began my job search.

The first source I turned to during my search was the job book that was kept by the faculty members in my doctoral program. As I looked through that job book, I was reminded of a song that was popular back then . . . "Is That All There Is?" Needless to say, the number of academic positions listed in the job book was considerably less than I had expected. Thus, I decided to turn to other sources in order to find out about position openings. This leads me to the first lesson:

Lesson 1: *Not every job is listed in a job book. There are many sources that list instructional design job openings. (See Table 1 for a list of some of those sources).*

By looking through some of the sources listed in Table 1, I was able to find several job announcements that were not in my department's job book. As I looked through the announcements that I found, I learned several lessons. One lesson was:

Lesson 2: *Most instructional design positions are in business and industry.*

Since I was looking for a position in academia, I found this lesson to be a bit disheartening. It was not as disheartening, however, as the next lesson I learned:

Lesson 3: *(Also known as "the faculty members' lament")—Most high-paying*

instructional design positions are in business and industry.

This lesson still holds true today. Many of the graduates of the instructional systems program where I teach begin their careers as designers in business and industry at higher salaries than that of faculty members who have been teaching for ten years!

Another lesson I learned as I went through the listings of job openings was that many prospective employers were looking for instructional designers with some media production skills. Today, as I peruse the listings of position openings in our field, I notice that skills in the design of computer-assisted instruction are highly desirable. Thus, the next lesson is updated in light of today's emphasis on "high technology":

Lesson 4: *Acquire some skills in the design of computer-assisted instruction.*

At this point, if you are becoming concerned about the type of position you will be qualified for, let me assuage your fears—don't worry, you'll manage. And you can take the last part of the preceding statement quite literally. As was the case when I was looking for a position, many current job announcements call for skills in the management of instructional design projects. Furthermore, many graduates of instructional design programs have indicated that shortly after they obtain a position they are thrust into some type of management role. So, we come to the next lesson:

Lesson 5: *Acquire some management skills.*

After mulling (and occasionally weeping) over the lessons I was learning, I began to apply for some of the positions I read about. Working away at the old typewriter (this was during the pre-wordprocessing age), I sent off many letters of inquiry. And before I knew it, I received my first reply, which leads me to the next lesson:

Lesson 6: *Don't be discouraged if you don't get the first job you apply for.*

With this piece of advice in mind, instead of dwelling on the rejection letter I had received, I waited eagerly for the next response. And before I knew it, it came. And with that response, came the next lesson:

Lesson 7: *Don't be discouraged if you don't get the second job you apply for.*

I could go on listing many similar lessons, but rather than dwelling on misfortune, let's just say I had a long string for bad luck. But, my luck finally changed and it did so when I attended the annual convention of the Association of Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), which was held in Dallas that year.

At the AECT convention, I registered with the job placement service, I gave several paper presentations, and I spoke with faculty from several universities (my professors were foolish enough to introduce me). In other words, in today's parlance, I kept a high profile. And for once in my life, my profile paid off. As a result of my activities at the convention, I was invited to two universities for job interviews; which leads me to the next lesson:

Lesson 8: *Become active in professional organizations. (See Table 2 for a listing of some of the organizations in which you may want to become active).*

Skills in media production, CAI design, and management are indispensable for the instructional designer.

Although my activities at the convention certainly led to my being invited to two universities for job interviews, I believe there was another contributing factor as well. At the time I attended the convention, several manuscripts I had written for class assignments and projects had been published. Since I was seeking a position in the world of "publish or perish," I assume my publication record did not go unnoticed. Thus, my next lesson:

Lesson 9: *Publish, don't cherish.*

The dictionary indicates that cherish means "to cling fondly to something." With regard to the papers you have written, I suggest that if you think they are good, instead of clinging to them (or flinging them), you should submit them to a journal for publication.

Where should you submit your papers? Table 3 provides a partial list of periodicals that are publication possibilities. I suggest that you review the types of articles found in those journals and that you submit your paper to the journal for which your manuscript seems best suited.

Since I am a strong believer in practicing what you preach, I would like to point out that I have submitted manuscripts to all of the journals listed in Table 3. Notice, however, that I used the words *submitted to*, not *published in*; on occasion my manuscripts have been rejected. Which leads me to the next lesson:

Lesson 10: *Don't be dejected if your manuscript is rejected.*

Even if your manuscript is rejected, you are likely to get some valuable feedback from those who reviewed it. If the feedback indicates that the manuscript has some redeeming qualities, I suggest that you use the feedback to revise your manuscript. After you do so, submit the revised manuscript to another journal, or perhaps resubmit it to the same journal. If you follow this strategy, it is likely that your manuscript eventually will be published, but don't be surprised if you receive some rejection notices first.

Speaking of rejection, let me get back to my story. When we last left me, I was about to go off to job interviews at two universities. The first of these interviews was at the University of Toledo. (I mention the name of the university only to point out that when I told my wife that I was to be interviewed there, her only reply was "Holy Toledo!")

I remember my interview at Toledo quite clearly. Everyone I met there was very nice and many of them were very interested in me and my work. One faculty member was particularly interested, and eventually our conversa-

Table 1

Sources Listing Instructional Design Job Openings

Periodicals:

- *Chronicle of Higher Education*
- *Educational Researcher*
- *Performance and Instruction*
- *Training and Development Journal*
- *Training*

Other Sources (see Table 2 for addresses of these organizations):

- **AECT Job Placement Service**—operates during AECT national meeting
- **AERA Placement Service**—operates during AERA national meeting
- **ASTD Position Referral Service**

tion turned to one of the areas in which I had professed some expertise. "What do you think about Smith's latest paper on that topic?" he asked. I responded by indicating that I had not read Smith's paper. "Well, have you read Jones' outstanding literature review in that area?" he inquired. Again, I had to respond that I had not read the paper he was referring to. The conversation continued to proceed in this fashion and as it did, I became more and more certain that I would not get the job. I was right—I didn't get the job, but I did learn another lesson:

Lesson 11: *Keep up with the literature in your areas of interest.*

How do you keep up with the literature? I suggest you do so by identifying the major journals in the field, as well as other journals that focus upon the topics in which you are most interested. I expect that many of the journals you identify will be those listed in Table 3.

After you have identified the journals you are interested in, try to skim through them on a regular basis. This suggestion does not mean you have to subscribe to all of the journals (get your university library to do that), nor does it mean you have to read each journal cover-to-cover. The suggestion does mean that you should look at the titles of the articles in each issue of each journal and that you should read the abstracts of the articles whose titles interest you. If you are still interested in an article after having read its abstract, I suggest that you make a copy of the article and file it away for future reference (if you are really ambitious, you may even choose to read the article before you file it).

Professional organizations like AECT and AERA as well as journals like *Educational Researcher* and *Training* are an excellent source of job listings.

Table 2

Professional Organizations of Potential Interest to Instructional Designers

- Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT)
1126 Sixteenth St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
- American Educational Research Association (AERA)
1230 Seventeenth St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
- National Society for Performance and Instruction (NSPI)
1126 Sixteenth St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
- American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)
600 Maryland Ave. S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024

Filing away articles is easy, retrieving articles when you need them is difficult. Therefore, the next lesson is important:

Lesson 12: *Develop a good filing (and retrieval) system for important literature.*

My filing system usually works for me. I file important articles in folders that are designated by topic headings such as "mastery learning research" and "formative evaluation." These folders are arranged alphabetically and, until recently, were strategically placed in piles all around my office. Although I now have the folders in a filing cabinet, piling the folders worked fine. Testimonial to this fact was given by a student who once asked me for some articles on a particular topic. I immediately

went to the right pile and pulled out the appropriate folder. The student, who was obviously impressed, complimented me by stating, "I really like your piling system."

I may have good filing (and piling) skills, but in 1975 I was not having any luck in interviewing. I didn't get the job at either of the universities that invited me for interviews. Shortly thereafter I had a job interview at a research and development center, but again I failed to get the job. (This failure was particularly disappointing—I was the only person who was interviewed. I did feel better, however, when I was told that the only reason I was not hired was because there had been an unexpected budget cutback.)

At this point, I decided to talk to my professors at Arizona State to see if they could give me some advice. This decision turned out to be a wise one because instead of advice, my professors gave me a job; they hired me as a faculty member in their department! This occurrence leads me to two lessons:

Lesson 13: *Let your professors know you are looking for a job.*

Lesson 14: *(Prerequisite to Lesson 13.)— Show your professors that you do good work.*

Lesson 13 is important because your professors may be aware of job opportunities that you are not aware of. But Lesson 14 is even more important

because it is unlikely that your professors will recommend you for a position, or even inform you of some possibilities, if you have failed to show them that you do good work. If, on the other hand, your work is good, your professors are likely to go out of their way to help you attain a good position. Since recommendations from professors often are a critical factor in determining whether a recent graduate obtains a particular job, I suggest that if you are still a student, you should pay careful attention to Lesson 14 (would you expect a professor to say otherwise?).

When my professors hired me as one of their colleagues, it was with the understanding that if another good job opportunity arose, I would pursue it. Thus I would be able to broaden my horizons and share the wisdom I had acquired at Arizona State with faculty members and students at other institutions. Besides, the contract money with which I had been hired wasn't expected to last forever.

Fortunately, well before Arizona State ran out of the contract money that was being used to pay me, I came across an announcement regarding an instructional design position that was available

at Florida State University. Unfortunately, although the position sounded very interesting, the position announcement indicated that applicants were expected to have skills in a number of areas in which I had no experience or training. Nonetheless, I decided to apply for the

position. And, sure enough, I got the job! Which brings me to the final lesson, the one I like to call "the formative evaluator's advice":

Lesson 15: *If the job doesn't fit, revise it. Apply for jobs that interest you, even if you don't have the exact qualifications called for.*

Why would an employer hire someone who does not have some of the skills the employer is looking for? I was told that in my case the fact that I was strong in some skill areas more than outweighed the fact that I lacked other skills. And, as those who hired me at Florida State expected, I was able to acquire some of those other skills once I obtained the job.

Now, over ten years after I first learned the lessons described in this article, I'm still at Florida State and I'm still learning. I hope that by following the lessons I have described, you will be able to obtain a position that has been as enjoyable as mine has been. Good luck!

Table 3

Partial List of Periodicals for Perusal and Publication Possibilities

Periodicals Dealing Primarily with Instructional Technology:

- *Journal of Instructional Development (JID)*
- *Educational Communications and Technology (ECTJ)*
- *Educational Technology*
- *Instructional Science*
- *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*
- *Journal of Computer-Based Instruction*
- *Performance and Instruction*
- *Programmed Learning and Educational Technology*

Other Periodicals of Potential Interest to Instructional Designers:

- *American Educational Research Journal (AERJ)*
- *Educational Researcher*
- *Journal of Educational Psychology*
- *Review of Educational Research (RER)*

A good student gets the job. Show your professors that you do good work. They can recommend you for a position.